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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000372

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NEA/ARP, NEA/I

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/14/2018  
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KU](#)  
SUBJECT: AMIR LAYS DOWN THE LAW AS CAMPAIGN BEGINS

REF: A. KUWAIT 411  
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 324

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Campaigning is officially underway for Kuwait's National Assembly election, scheduled for May 16. The country's relatively open democratic environment continues to allow for lively political events, but this campaign season the Amir and his interim government have signaled that they intend to strictly, although perhaps selectively, enforce Kuwaiti laws that place some limits on speech and activities of some candidates -- primarily from tribal constituencies. This year's campaign also will be notable for the absence of several former Assembly members who have dropped out of the race.

Amir Warns Against Inciting Instability  
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[1](#)2. (C) Amir Sabah on April 12 convened an extraordinary meeting of his interim cabinet just three days before issuing a decree fixing May 16 as the date for the National Assembly election. In a message that echoed warnings to the last parliament, the Amir commented that recent developments in the campaign represented a "threat to security, stability and national unity." The characteristically opaque statement almost certainly was prompted by the comments of Khaled Al-Tahous, a candidate for the tribally dominated fifth district who publicly threatened that tribes would resist security forces should they interfere with tribal far'eeyat (Arabic: primaries). The primaries, while technically illegal, were long tolerated until last year's election when the government ordered security forces to stop them, leading to clashes between angry mobs of tribal members and the police. (Ref A)

The Government Makes A Show of Force  
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[1](#)3. (C) The government responded to Al-Tahous' threat by arresting him on April 8 on charges of instigating resistance to the regime. Al-Tahous, a union leader and member of the Al-Ajmi tribe, one of the largest in Kuwait, made his comments on April 6 at a political rally with Popular Action Bloc member and former MP Musallam al-Barrak. He remains in custody as of April 14 and his arrest has led some former MPs to complain that the government is violating his rights. The Amir, however, is signaling that he does not plan to soften his stance. During the April 12 cabinet meeting, he directed the government to use all legal means to prosecute those that threaten national unity. As part of this effort, the Information Ministry is reportedly forming committees to monitor the media as well as mobile phone text messages for

potentially illegal content. Post knows of no further arrests, but press reports indicate that the Public Prosecution Department has ordered the detention of seven members of the Al-Mutairi tribe for organizing a tribal primary and that it is considering arresting former tribal MP and vocal critic of the government, Dhaifallah Bou Ramiya, and political activist Mohammed Al-Hajeri, on charges of defaming caretaker PM Shaykh Nasser and MinDef Shaykh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Sabah (currently touted as the next PM).

#### Some Former Assembly Members Bow Out

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¶4. (C) In another notable development, seven politicians who were members of the last Assembly have announced that they will not run for reelection. Among those who have left the race are two politicians with a long history of service in parliament. Nasser al-Sane, a member of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM - Kuwait Muslim Brotherhood), has held a seat since 1992. On the other end of the political spectrum, Mohammed al-Sager, a liberal and a member of the National Democratic Alliance political coalition, has been in parliament since 1999. Both also have chaired parliamentary committees during their service, with al-Sager serving as chairman of the last Assembly's foreign relations committee. Al-Sager's withdrawal from the race means that he will no longer serve as Speaker of the transnational Arab Interim Parliament.

Comment:

¶5. (C) The Amir and vocally critical candidates appear to

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be playing a game of "political chicken." Oppositionists appear to be pushing the boundaries of permissible speech to gain popular support, betting that the Amir will accept the election results as he has in the past. On the other hand, the Amir's recent statements, which are being broadly interpreted as "make the right choice or I shall be forced to dissolve unconstitutionally," likely reflect an effort to shape the outcome of the election to the ruling family's advantage.

¶6. (C) The withdrawal of seven former MPs from the race may have multiple implications. These politicians probably bowed out for a variety of reasons, including fatigue with the ongoing political impasse, the expense of elections (candidates spent \$21 million on advertising alone in last year's contest), and the belief that the next Assembly is not likely to stay in place for long before another dissolution. The loss of experienced leaders could contribute to even greater factionalism within the Assembly on the one hand, or open the way to new leadership on the other, perhaps among women candidates now vying for a seat (Ref B). To the extent that candidates' withdrawal represents fatigue, however, Kuwait's democracy could be weakened going forward, especially if more Kuwaitis become disillusioned with the political process and disengage. End comment.

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